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Still Knockin' on Heaven's Door: Narcissism and Prayer

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Abstract

This article reports on a study of the relationship between narcissism, an important personality trait in individualistic societies, and different varieties of prayer. We distinguish between two kinds of narcissism (overt and covert), and four types of prayer (petitionary, religious, meditative and psychological). The study was carried out by inviting 99 students to complete questionnaires about narcissism and prayer. It revealed a positive correlation between covert narcissism and petitionary and religious prayer. Overt narcissism correlates positively with meditative and psychological prayer. The article discusses in detail the significance of the relationships between narcissism and varieties of prayer.

Keywords

individualism, narcissism, prayer

1. Introduction

Present-day Western culture is generally characterized as highly individualistic (Bellah et al., 1996). Bellah et al. (1996, p. 334) describe individualism as “a belief in the inherent dignity and... sacredness of the human person”. They identify four types of individualism: biblical, republican, utilitarian and expressive. Like other authors, such as Taylor (2002), they consider expressive individualism the most important.

In expressive individualism people face the task of building up an existence of their own without being able to rely on predefined views of what makes life worth living. Everyone is expected to steer their own course and to construct such views by themselves. Important values in this kind of individualism are: (1) autonomy, (2) setting oneself apart from others, (3) personal development, and (4) expression of emotions (Zondag, 2009).

This constant focus on and observation of oneself, this strong psychological interest in oneself can be described as narcissism (Bursten, 1982). There is thus a correlation between expressive individualism and narcissism. Narcissism as a personality trait — like expressive individualism — is widespread nowadays (Twenge, 2007). Scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), the chief instrument used to measure narcissism in Anglophone areas, showed a steep rise between 1979 — the year the NPI was introduced — and 2006. Two thirds of students who attended courses in 2006 scored above the average of students in the 1979-1985 period, a rise of 30% (Twenge et al., 2008). And whereas in 1950 12% of American teenagers declared “I am an important person”, by the end of the 1980s 80% of them endorsed this statement (Newsome et al., 2003). The increased importance of narcissism is not restricted to the United States. Narcissism as a personality dimension also became more prevalent in West European countries such as the Netherlands (Van den Brink, 2001; Derksen, 2009).

Expressive individualism — that is narcissism — is said to be accompanied by indifference towards institutions, worldviews and religion (Elchardus & Heyvaert, 1991). Narcissists supposedly do not believe, go to church, or use religion to cope with problems they encounter in life. This suggests a negative correlation between narcissism and religion.

However, religion and narcissism turn out not to be mutually exclusive. A positive correlation between narcissism and extrinsic religious orientation has regularly been observed (Watson et al., 1987; Watson et al., 1990). People with a distinct narcissistic attitude also use different types of religious coping (Zondag & Van Uden, 2010). Religious coping may help to remedy narcissistic hurt. Like other coping strategies, it serves to restore self-esteem and a sense of being in control of one's own life. These goals are held in high regard by people with a narcissistic habitus (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001).

The most frequent religious act is prayer. Its significance in people's personal lives can hardly be overrated (Hood, Hill & Spilka, 2009). People pray in response to all sorts of events and at all sorts of places and times. There is still collective prayer, even in cultures that are dominated by expressive individualism and narcissism. In the Netherlands 63% of the population claim to pray occasionally (Bernts, Dekker & De Hart, 2007) and 80% of these pray for a solution to problems and to become aware of themselves. Of those who pray, 30% do so several times per day, 25% once a day, 19% once a week, 10% once a month and 16% several times a year. There are hardly any differences between older and younger Dutch people. Young people still pray — 61% of them occasionally (Campiche, 1997). This is attributable to the fact that prayer is a ritual that is easy to perform and whose execution is not restricted to a special location or

time. Thus many young people pray in their beds at home (Janssen et al., 2000). Prayer is a religious act that accords with the wish for personal modelling.

At the same time we have hardly any insight into the connection between prayer and tendencies towards individualization and narcissism. So far this relation has not been studied. A literature search using PsychInfo provided no information on such studies. We hope that the research described here will fill the gap. The question we want to answer is this: what is the relationship between narcissism and prayer? The purpose of the article is to obtain a clearer picture of what an important dimension of personality means for an important element of religion. We not only want to know whether there is a correlation between narcissism and prayer, but also want to specify this correlation. Different types of narcissism and different types of prayer can be distinguished (Zondag, 2005; Bänziger, 2007). This study seeks to explore the connection between different dimensions of narcissism and different types of prayer. Narcissism can manifest itself in various ways. Firstly, people with a narcissistic attitude may pray in a certain way. Second, narcissism itself may be a reason to pray. This is because narcissism makes people vulnerable and is associated with inner emptiness, depression and dissatisfaction with life (Rose, 2002). Such problems may lead people to use prayer as a problem-solving strategy. Hence we also look into other motives for prayer besides narcissism. This allows us to determine to some extent the relation between narcissism and other motives for prayer, such as depression and boredom. These issues are manifestations of inner emptiness and are often connected with narcissism (Capps, 1993; Wink, 1996; Wink & Donahue, 1997).

The article is structured as follows. We start by looking at the concepts of narcissism and prayer, ending with a section on the relationship between the two. In the process we also pay attention to the relation between various dimensions of narcissism and forms of prayer. We then describe an empirical study that was conducted. Finally we discuss the findings.

2. Narcissism

Narcissism is a strong focus on the self, accompanied by lack of empathy, need for admiration and fantasies of omnipotence and grandeur (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). It is important to distinguish between 'subclinical' or 'everyday' narcissism and 'clinical' narcissism. Clinical narcissism is a personality disorder. People displaying subclinical or everyday narcissism show some characteristics of narcissistic personality disorder, but not sufficient to diagnose them as suffering from that disorder (Foster, Campbell & Twenge, 2003;

Campbell & Foster, 2007). In this study subclinical or everyday narcissism is the variable of interest.

Narcissism is a multidimensional phenomenon. Two important dimensions are 'overt' and 'covert' narcissism (Wink, 1991; 1996; Rose, 2002). Overt narcissists demand a great deal of attention and want to be admired by others. They perceive themselves as grand and show it openly. As to relationships, they are often dominant and demanding. They can be engaging to others, even if they have little interest in others' needs. Overt narcissists will rarely admit to feeling small or experiencing emptiness in their lives. By contrast covert narcissists often feel inferior, insecure, shy and inhibited. They have little self-confidence and are very sensitive to potential criticism by others. The desire for admiration, power and grandeur, which they certainly harbour, remains hidden from others. What persons with a disposition towards either overt or covert narcissism have in common is arrogance and egocentricity (Rose, 2002). In addition both dimensions are characterized by fact that the individual's own needs take precedence over those of others and that fantasies of greatness prevail. Wink (1996, p. 166) writes: "Narcissistic fantasies of power and grandeur can equally well lurk behind a bombastic and exhibitionistic facade as one of shyness, vulnerability and depletion." The overt dimension generally coincides with psychological well-being. Overt narcissism correlates positively with optimism (Hickman, Watson & Morris, 1996), absence of depression (Rathvon & Holstrom, 1996; Zondag, Van Halen & Wojtkowiak, 2009), self-esteem and satisfaction with life (Rose, 2002), and meaning of life (Zondag, 2005). Covert narcissism often relates negatively to psychological well-being (Wink, 1991); thus it correlates with depression (Wink, 1992; Rathvon & Holstrom, 1996; Zondag et al., 2009), anxiety (Rathvon & Holstrom, 1996), low self-esteem and low satisfaction with life (Rose, 2002), and absence of meaning of life (Zondag, 2005; Zondag et al., 2009).

How does expressive individualism correlate with the two types of narcissism? It relates to views about the self and society and could be defined as a system of values and standards. Narcissism is a closely related psychological condition (Capps, 1993) and can be considered the psychological correlative of expressive individualism. Expressive individualism is characterized by a highly normative element. One should be autonomous, distinguish oneself from other people, develop oneself and express one's emotions (Sunier, 2004). This ideal is common to both types of narcissism and people judge themselves according to their attainment of it. A person with a distinctly overt attitude succeeds in attaining this ideal — in his own eyes — whereas a person with a distinctly covert attitude fails — in her own eyes. What applies to both narcissistic types is that people focus on the overt individualistic ideal, which will be normative for their self-perception.

3. Prayer

Prayer is a ritual, comprising a cause or motive to pray (e.g. a problem), an act which constitutes the prayer proper, an orientation (e.g. towards God, a higher power, oneself) and a desired effect that correlates with the cause for prayer (e.g. the solution to a problem) (Bänziger, 2007; Bänziger, Van Uden & Janssen, 2008). These elements are found in all types of prayer, but they feature more or less prominently in actual prayers. On grounds of prominence we distinguish between four types of prayer: petitionary, religious, meditative and psychological prayers (Janssen et al., 2000; Bänziger, 2007).

The effect is the key element of petitionary prayer. A concrete and material problem causes the praying person to turn to a personal God and ask him for a solution to the problem. The problem may be connected with the supplicant herself (e.g. the supplicant herself is ill), or with another person (someone else is ill). The desired effect is the natural outcome of the request (one's own or the other person's recovery). Consequently the desired effect and the request mirror each other. This type of prayer is a form of primary control aimed at concrete, material alteration of the conditions of life.

The most important element in religious prayer is its orientation. Religious prayer focuses on God. The person who says a religious prayer tries to establish contact with a personal God, for instance to thank him or ask his forgiveness. Confirmation of faith in God is central to this type of prayer (Finney & Malony, 1985). It seeks to deepen faith and establish stronger ties with God. More than the other types of prayer, religious prayer takes place in a church or in some other religious setting and it is often accompanied by the bodily posture typically associated with prayer: kneeling.

The characteristic element of meditative prayer is the act, which is of a cognitive nature. This type of prayer is mainly connected with reflection, contemplation, thought and taking stock of one's personal life and existence as a human being. The praying person withdraws into herself and hopes this will make her a better person. She longs for self-consciousness, insight and inner calm. To attain this she turns to a higher power and frequently also to herself, rather than to a concrete and personal God. Of all types of prayer meditative prayer is least connected with a particular place or time.

Finally, psychological prayer centres on its cause. More often than not the cause is connected with existential problems, needs and sorrows. Preoccupied with these problems, the supplicant turns to a higher power. It is there that he seeks support and a contact to whom he can pour out his heart. On the whole psychological prayer is not aimed at an immediate solution to the problems, as the supplicant is really searching for ways to cope with her problems and her life in which they reside. This is a significant difference from petitionary prayer,

which is aimed at a concrete solution that a personal God is expected to provide. Psychological prayer is a form of secondary control, in which the problem remains but the person alters. He hopes to be capable of coping with the problem. Psychological prayers are often said at night, in bed (Janssen et al., 2000).

4. Narcissism and Prayer

People who are dominated by covert narcissism often consider themselves vulnerable, powerless and lacking in self-confidence. This is a problem in its own right that can be a cause for prayer. Apart from this, they feel they are too weak to be able to deal with the problems they encounter in their lives. They turn to other people for solutions and depend on them for support. Hence they can be expected to show a preference for petitionary or religious prayer. After all, it is these types of prayer that enable them to turn to others, hoping that they will supply solutions or that contact with them will provide the support needed to cope with problems. There may also be a positive correlation with psychological prayer, as this type of prayer is a way of growing stronger to cope with problems. We do not expect to find a preference for meditative prayer. In this type of prayer the individual is thrown back on herself, a situation a covert narcissist tries to avoid.

People who manifest dominant overt narcissism consider themselves invulnerable and strong, and are self-confident. They feel capable of directing their lives and do not need help from others to solve their problems. Their narcissism does not pose any problems for themselves. When problems arise they trust in their own ability to solve them without having to turn to others; that would not accord with their outsize self-esteem. Therefore we expect a positive correlation with the meditative and psychological types of prayer. After all, these types of prayer presuppose a primary focus on the self. We also expect a negative correlation with religious prayer. This sort of prayer focuses on God, whereas the overt narcissist wants to be the centre of attention himself. The relation between overt narcissism and a preference for petitionary prayer is expected to be negative. Petitionary prayer focuses on other people for help, which is something persons with overt narcissistic tendencies do not need. They are self-sufficient. On the other hand, it may be argued that there is a positive correlation. Persons with strong leanings towards overt narcissism can be dominant and demanding in their relations with other people and may feel that the person or institution they address in their prayers has to comply with their desires. The predicted correlations are summarized in Figure 1.

Figure1: Expected correlations between narcissism and variants of praying

	Covert narcissism	Overt narcissism
Petitionary prayer	+	0
Religious prayer	+	–
Meditative prayer	–	+
Psychological prayer	+	+

–: negative relation; +: positive relation

Naturally there are more causes for prayer than narcissistic ones. In order to determine the relative strength of narcissistic causes to some extent, we look at two other causes: depression and boredom. People with a pronounced narcissistic attitude long for admiration and acknowledgment, either more or less overtly in the case of overt narcissism, or more covertly in the case of covert narcissism. When admiration and acknowledgment are not forthcoming — a common experience — they feel deeply hurt and empty (Kohut, 1971; Capps, 1993). This emptiness is expressed in feelings of depression and boredom (Capps, 1993; Wink, 1996; Wink & Donnahue, 1997). Depression is a never-ending state of mind dominated by profound sadness, pessimism and lack of confidence (Reber, 1989). Following Mikulas and Vodanovich (1993, p. 1) we define boredom as “a state of relatively low arousal and dissatisfaction which is attributed to an inadequately stimulating environment”. Although closely related, depression and boredom should be distinguished. Farmer and Sundberg (1986) argue that depression and boredom differ in regard to (1) quality: depression is about sadness and personal loss; boredom is about a lack of interest; (2) intensity: depression is a more intense state of mind than boredom; and (3) the role played by the environment: depression is related to unpleasant occurrences; in the case of boredom the environment is experienced as being monotonous.

5. Method

5.1 *Participants*

A total of 99 psychology students at Nijmegen's Radboud University took part in the study. This could earn them either five euros or one hour as a test

subject (all psychology students are required to spend eight hours taking part in studies carried out at the Psychology Faculty). Their average age was 21.8 years ($SD = 2.7$). Sixteen percent were men and 84% women. The questionnaires were completed separately in one of the research rooms at the Psychology Faculty.

5.2 Measures

Narcissism

Narcissism was studied using the Dutch Narcissism Scale (Ettema & Zondag, 2002), a measure of subclinical narcissism. The Dutch Narcissism Scale is based on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory developed by Raskin and Hall (1979; 1981) and on Hendin and Cheek's Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (Hendin & Cheek, 1997). The scale comprises two subscales assessing overt and covert narcissism. An example of an item from the subscale for overt narcissism is, "I can easily get others to do what I feel is necessary". An example from the subscale for covert narcissism is, "When I enter a room I am often painfully aware of the way others look at me". For both scales respondents use a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 ("Certainly not the case") to 7 ("Certainly the case"). The overt narcissism subscale consists of nine items and the covert narcissism subscale of seventeen items. High scores indicate a high degree of narcissism. The validity of the Dutch Narcissism Scale in both subscales was apparent from relations with self-esteem, burnout and empathy (Ettema & Zondag, 2002), meaning of life (Zondag, 2005; Zondag et al., 2009), and satisfaction with life and depression (Zondag et al., 2009). The reliability coefficients (Cronbach's α) for the two subscales were .77 and .87, respectively.

Prayer

Frequency of prayer was measured by asking, "Do you ever pray?" Participants responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 ("Never") through 2 ("Rarely, i.e. now and again"), 3 ("Sometimes (several times a year)") and 4 ("Regularly (monthly or several times a month)") to 5 ("Frequently (weekly to daily)"). Non-praying respondents were excluded from further analysis.

The four types of prayer (petitionary, religious, meditative and psychological) were measured on scales designed by Bänziger (2007). Examples of items are: "When praying I have a feeling of receiving strength and support" (petitionary prayer), "When praying I have a feeling of being in contact with God" (religious prayer), "When praying I reflect on all sorts of occurrences" (meditative prayer) and "When praying I can pour out my heart" (psychological

prayer). For all scales respondents used a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 ("Never") to 7 ("Always"). All scales consist of six items. The higher the score, the greater the frequency of the respondent's prayers of that kind. The validity of the scales is inferred from indications of ecclesiastic involvement, religiosity and religious coping (Bänziger, 2007; Bänziger, Van Uden & Janssen, 2008). The reliability coefficients (Cronbach's α) for the subscales for petitionary, religious, meditative and psychological prayer were .83, .74, .77 and .87, respectively.

Depression

Depression was studied using the VROPSOM lists (Arrindell & Van Rooijen, 1999). The lists contain 34 adjectives (e.g. "healthy" and "sad") and respondents are asked to tick each adjective that reflects how they generally feel. The higher the score, the stronger the depressive affect. The reliability (Cronbach's α) for VROPSOM lists was .73.

Boredom

Boredom was examined by means of the Dutch Language Scale for Boredom Proneness (Zondag, 2007). This scale comprises 55 items, for example "Sometimes it seems the day will never end". Respondents used a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 ("Certainly not the case") to 7 ("Certainly the case"). High scores indicate greater boredom proneness. The reliability (Cronbach's α) of the scale is .92.

6. Results

The average scores for overt and covert narcissism are 5.19 (SD .65) and 4.28 (SD .89), respectively. As to frequency of prayer, 2% never pray, 33% pray rarely, 20% occasionally, 23% regularly and 22% frequently. The average scores for the types of prayer are: petitionary prayer 3.64 (SD 1.45); religious prayer 2.23 (SD 1.02); meditative prayer 3.80 (SD 1.39) and psychological prayer 3.82 (SD 1.57). The Pearson correlation between age and covert narcissism is $-.27$ ($p < .01$). There is no correlation between age and gender and narcissism, frequency of prayer and types of prayer. Nor is there a correlation between overt and covert narcissism. The correlations between frequency of prayer and the four types of prayer are listed in Table 1.

All relations between frequency of prayer and types of prayer are positive. There is a positive correlation between frequency of prayer and types of prayer; the most positive is with religious prayer, but relatively weaker with

Table 1: Pearson correlations between overt and covert narcissism, frequency of prayer, types of prayer, depression and boredom

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Covert narcissism	-.11	.02	.38***	.30**	.07	.27**	.45***	.50***
2. Overt narcissism	—	-.05	.14	.00	.20*	.14	-.33***	-.23*
3. Frequency of prayer		—	.34**	.55***	.52***	.37**	.17	-.15
4. Petitionary prayer			—	.73***	.38***	.81***	.16	.13
5. Religious prayer				—	.29**	.77***	.17	.05
6. Meditative prayer					—	.48***	.15	-.07
7. Psychological prayer						—	.28*	.15
8. Depression							—	.51***
9. Boredom								—

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

petitionary prayer. The four types of prayer also show a pronounced correlation. The strongest correlation is between psychological prayer and petitionary prayer, the lowest is between religious prayer and meditative prayer.

What are the relations between overt and covert narcissism on the one hand, and those between frequency of prayer and the four types of prayer (Table 1) on the other? There is a positive correlation between covert narcissism and petitionary, religious and psychological prayer. There is no correlation between covert narcissism and frequency of prayer or meditative prayer. Overt narcissism does show a positive correlation with meditative prayer, but there is no correlation with the other types of prayer and frequency of prayer.

It is apparent that prayer and narcissism are connected, which indicates that narcissism may lead to a certain manner of praying. In order to determine how narcissism relates to other causes for prayer we carried out regression analyses. These analyses were carried out in three steps. Step one: age and gender were entered into the prediction of frequency of prayer and types of prayer. Step two: two indicators of existential emptiness were entered (depression and boredom). Finally, in step three, overt and covert narcissism were entered. A summary of the results can be found in Table 2.

In step one we predict the frequency of prayer and the four types of prayer based on age and gender. Neither of these elements have any predictive value. The two indicators of existential emptiness are added in step two. Depression predicts psychological prayer, whereas boredom has no predictive qualities. Consequently this problem is no cause whatsoever to pray. Step three shows the added predictive value of overt and covert narcissism. Neither overt nor covert narcissism is a predictor of frequency of prayer. So these two forms of narcissism provide no information about whether or not people pray. On the

Table 2: Stepwise regression analysis. Prayer predicted on basis of age, gender, other motives for praying, and overt and covert narcissism. Standardized beta values and R square

	Frequency	Petitionary	Religious	Meditative	Psychological
Step 1					
Age					
Gender					
R square					
Step 2					
Age					
Gender					
Depression					.24
Boredom					
R square					.06
Step 3					
Age					
Gender					
Depression					.30
Boredom					
Overt narcissism				.20	.22
Covert narcissism		.37	.30		
R square		.14	.09	.04	.10

Only beta weights significant to at least $p < .05$ are included

other hand they do predict how people pray, in other words the style of prayer. The predictive value of covert narcissism appears to be highest in the case of the petitionary prayer. This dimension of narcissism also predicts whether people pray religiously. Overt narcissism helps to predict meditative and psychological prayer. Overt narcissism, in combination with depression, predicts whether people use the psychological type of prayer. The relation between covert narcissism and psychological prayer, as shown in the correlation, does not appear from the regression analyses. This may be attributable to the somewhat more pronounced correlation between depression and psychological prayer (Pearson correlation .27, $p < .01$) and the variance shared by depression and covert narcissism (Pearson correlation .45, $p < .001$).

7. Conclusions and discussion

The main question in this article is the nature of the relation between overt and covert narcissism and the four types of prayer. Our answer is based on the

Figure 2: Summary of the results of the examination of the relation between narcissism and prayer

Overt narcissism	Covert narcissism
Strong self	Weak self
Meditative prayer Psychological prayer	Religious prayer Petitionary prayer
God absent from prayer	God present in prayer

results of the regression analysis which provides the most balanced results. Covert narcissism shows a positive correlation with petitionary and religious prayer; overt narcissism relates positively to meditative and psychological prayer. There is no relation between the two dimensions of narcissism and frequency of prayer. We summarize the results of the examination in Figure 2.

Figure 2 is based on two dimensions. The first dimension defines if a person has strong or weak self-esteem. Strong self-esteem is characteristic of overt narcissism, weak self-esteem is typical of covert narcissism (Wink, 1996). The second dimension deals with the role of God in prayers. Does a personal God occupy a focal position for the praying person or a more marginal position? The praying person focuses most strongly on God in religious and petitionary prayer, in which God occupies a central position. In meditative and psychological prayer, on the other hand, God occupies a marginal position. In these types of prayer the praying person focuses on himself or on a higher power. These two dimensions provide the basis for the following summary of our results: the stronger a person's self-esteem, the less she is oriented towards God and the more she focuses on herself or a higher power. Conversely, the weaker a person's self-esteem, the more he focuses on God in his prayers. Put differently: overt narcissists are more inclined towards meditative and psychological prayer, whereas covert narcissists tend towards petitionary and religious prayer.

Persons with covert narcissistic tendencies ask God for many things and try to establish contact with him. This indicates a strong idealizing aspect of covert narcissism (Kohut, 1971). Covert narcissists affiliate with God as the omnipotent other being. Because of their own impotence they want to enter into an alliance with an omnipotent other being to ensure existential security and support. They see themselves as weak, but psychological balance is restored by allying themselves with an omnipotent other being. This alliance is established and maintained through religious and petitionary types of prayer.

The overriding element for persons inclining towards overt narcissism is grandeur (Kohut, 1971). They take pride in the qualities (supposed or otherwise) that they ascribe to themselves and they are in no need of others. At all events, they feel no need for an omnipotent God to turn to in petitionary and religious prayer. This is not to say that they reject all prayer, as they tend towards meditative and psychological prayer to a considerable extent. However, in these types of prayer they focus on themselves in the case of meditative prayer, or on an anonymous power in the case of psychological prayer. An anonymous power may be acceptable, as its abstract, impersonal nature does not compete with the greatness they ascribe to themselves. This would be the case in petitionary and religious prayers, in which they turn to a God with pronounced personal traits.

At this point we return to the hypotheses that were formulated earlier in this research. We expressed two sorts of expectations about the relation between overt narcissism and petitionary prayer. First we posited the existence of a negative correlation. A person with overt narcissistic leanings feels comfortable with himself and in consequence will not turn to God. Secondly we advanced arguments for a positive correlation. People who tend towards overt narcissism want other people to comply with their wishes and consequently demand help. The results of the research correspond with our first hypothesis.

We also did not find a negative correlation between overt narcissism and religious prayer and between covert narcissism and meditative prayer, which is contrary to our expectation. These types of narcissism and prayer are neither mutually exclusive nor mutually inclusive. One should rather say that persons who tend towards overt or covert narcissism do not show a clear preference for these types of prayer. This also applies to the model described above. There is a tendency for overt narcissists to show a preference for meditative and psychological prayer and for covert narcissists to settle for religious and petitionary prayer. However, these tendencies are relative.

The simple relation that we found between covert narcissism and psychological prayer (Table 1) does not emerge from the regression analysis (Table 2). Psychological prayer is predicted by overt narcissism and depression. Covert narcissism is not a predictor of psychological prayer. This is connected with the relations between depression, covert narcissism and psychological prayer. The correlation between psychological prayer and depression is somewhat stronger than the one between psychological prayer and covert narcissism (Table 1). We note a minimal difference (.01), but enough to predict that psychological prayer will 'overshadow' what is predicted by covert narcissism. This is corroborated by the fact that covert narcissism does predict psychological prayer when depression is not included as a predictive factor.

We found no relation between the two dimensions of narcissism and frequency of prayer. What we did find was a relation between both dimensions of narcissism and the various types of prayer. This indicates that narcissism may not be a cause for higher or lower frequency of prayer, but may motivate people to pray in a certain way. Overt narcissism motivates a focus on oneself during prayer, whereas covert narcissism directs the focus towards God to a greater degree. There is a close connection between frequency of prayer and the extent of religious — not necessarily ecclesiastic — involvement (Bänziger, 2007). The decision to start praying may depend primarily on religious involvement and the style of prayer on the nature of the narcissistic concern. Religious involvement induces religious practices such as prayer. The nature of the personality, in this case governed by narcissism, ‘controls’ the specific shape of the prayer. This, too, strikes us as an interesting subject for future research.

The more comprehensive framework of this examination is the relation between individualization — in this case in the form of narcissism — and religiosity. A key question is whether secularization and growing individualization (and narcissism) go hand in hand, or whether religion adapts to the trend towards individualization (Hellemans, 2007). Our study shows that the latter is the most likely development. Narcissism and religion in the form of prayer are not mutually exclusive at all. In an earlier study we found that narcissism and religious coping do not rule each other out (Zondag & Van Uden, 2010). Narcissistic variants are connected with various styles of religious coping. The same holds good for the relation between narcissistic variants and styles of prayer. Religion seems to adapt to an individualistic (i.e. narcissistic) outlook on life. And even though the type of prayer changes with one’s personality characteristics, people are still knockin’ on heaven’s door.¹

Why do people still consider ‘knockin’ on heaven’s door’ in an era of expressive individualism? The expressively individualistic pattern of values and standards not only offers possibilities, it is also complicating. The self is the central axis of an expressively individualistic existence. A person who manages to realise herself in an exaggerated way, as is the case with overt narcissism, praises herself. The person who fails to live up to the extreme requirements he sets himself, as in the case of covert narcissism, is left with few options but to blame himself (Dehue, 2008). But even those who are successful are haunted by a permanent threat of possible failure (Baumeister, 1991). In short, the expressively individualistic project does not offer a great deal of peace of mind. It causes existential pressure from which people want to escape. Two types of

¹ ‘Knockin’ on heaven’s door’ is a track from the Bob Dylan record ‘Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid’ (1973).

reaction seem to emerge (Zondag, 2009). Characteristically the first type is to adopt an inward-looking attitude, which finds expression in a preference for meditative and psychological prayer. These are people who conform to a more overt narcissistic pattern. Typically the second reaction is to turn to God, expressed in a preference for petitionary and religious prayer. It is the preferred reaction of the covert narcissist.

In this context we need to discuss people's religious self-description. People who describe themselves as religious feel a stronger affinity with an institutional faith shaped by tradition. They are more orthodox in their views and frequently believe in a personal God (Hood et al., 2009; Roof, 1999; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Those who see themselves as spiritual tend to rely on their own experiences in matters of faith and tend to see themselves as 'seekers'. They are far less concerned about orthodoxy and instead believe in an abstract, anonymous power transcending humans. In our opinion a preference for petitionary and religious prayer goes with a religious self-description. Both types of prayer focus on a personal God and this focus is characteristic of a religious self-description. The preference for meditative and psychological prayer goes with a spiritual self-description. These types of prayer address an abstract, anonymous higher power, which is typical of a spiritual self-description. Our examination of the relation between narcissism and prayer indicates that a personality dimension — narcissism — may affect the preference for either a religious or spiritual self-description. Overt narcissism may be connected with a preference for a spiritual description, given the relation between overt narcissism and meditative and psychological prayer. Covert narcissism, in view of its link with petitionary and religious prayer, is connected with a religious self-description. Clearly the next step is to explicitly examine the link between narcissism and religious/spiritual self-description.

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